

Recommendations for Strengthening Nutrition Security through SNAP in North Carolina

The North Carolina Project

Strengthening nutrition security through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will have an immediate impact on North Carolina's more than 1.4 million participants (70% of whom are in households with children). Over a nine-month period (January-September 2020), the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) worked with diverse stakeholders across North Carolina to develop consensus around a set of SNAP pilot recommendations.

Three regional virtual convenings brought together a number of organizational stakeholders who contributed their expertise in public health, nutrition, food insecurity, social justice, and policy. Key informants added additional insights. CSPI contracted Food Insight Group to conduct focus groups and interviews with SNAP participants to gain insights into potential impact, barriers, and opportunities for strengthening nutrition security through SNAP. The work resulted in the following recommendations for pilots that could be tested in the state.

Top Pilot Recommendations - strategies widely supported by SNAP participants, convening attendees, and key informants

Expand Incentives

Healthy SNAP incentives, such as having more spending power when using SNAP benefits to purchase produce, were widely popular among SNAP participants and stakeholders. Participants recommended expanding incentives to include allowing SNAP incentives to be redeemed at more types of retailers (such as large chain grocery stores) and incentivizing more types of healthy items, such as dairy, whole grains, lean protein, and eggs. There was a strong preference for incentives to be issued instantaneously rather than for use at a later date.

Healthier In-Store Changes

Changes to promote in-store healthy choices in retail settings were among the top recommendations at all three regional convenings and were viewed favorably by SNAP participants and key informants. The specific recommended strategies include highlighting healthy items in the store, encouraging small stores to stock more healthy items by providing incentives to the retailers, and combining [stocking standards](#) with marketing standards. SNAP participants noted that removing unhealthy items at the point-of-sale displays and eliminating price promotions on junk food would help discourage purchasing them. Many mentioned that pricing greatly influenced their purchases.

Increase Monthly Benefits

Many individuals at the regional convenings emphasized the importance of increasing SNAP benefits to improve diet quality. Pilots were suggested to help determine the appropriate amount by which to increase benefits for optimal nutrition-related outcomes. SNAP participants overwhelmingly cited increasing SNAP benefits as a strategy that would help them purchase more healthy items.

Pilot Recommendations with High Support - strategies supported by most but not all stakeholders

Opt-In Program Linking Incentives to SSB reduction strategies

Studies demonstrate that combining SNAP incentives for healthy foods with strategies for reducing purchases and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) could significantly improve diets and health. This approach was a top recommendation at the regional convenings, with the caveat that SNAP participants should be allowed to opt-in to this program. Some SNAP participants liked the combined approach. Others did not support this strategy because they wanted their SNAP benefit funding to be consistent and not change based on the healthfulness/unhealthfulness of their shopping cart.

Allow SNAP Benefits to Purchase Hot, Prepared Foods

Although discussion facilitators did not specifically ask about this strategy, stakeholders and SNAP participants suggested during open-ended discussions that SNAP benefits used for purchasing hot foods would make it easier for some participants to eat fresh, healthy meals. This was a top recommendation at one regional convening.

Streamline SNAP with Other Services

Stakeholders noted that it makes sense to align SNAP with other programs serving people with low incomes. Although discussion facilitators did not specifically ask about this strategy, streamlining SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid emerged as a top recommendation through open-ended discussions at one regional convening.

Pilot Recommendations with Mixed Levels of Support - strategies supported by some but encountered significant opposition from others.

Sugary Beverage Tax Supporting SNAP Incentives

Convening attendees discussed a possible statewide SSB tax in North Carolina with revenue earmarked for SNAP produce incentives. People agreed that this strategy had positive attributes, such as the disincentive applying to all consumers, providing additional purchasing power for SNAP participants, and sustainable funding for incentives. However, many did not believe this was a viable option in the state legislature. This strategy was not recommended at the convenings. Facilitators did not ask SNAP participants and key informants about this strategy and it was not raised during open-ended focus group and interview discussions.

Increase Access and Healthy Options with Online SNAP Retailers

Many stakeholders recommended changes to make online shopping healthier and more accessible for SNAP participants. This was a top recommendation at two regional convenings. However, online shopping with SNAP benefits was mostly unpopular during the focus groups and interviews. Participants did not want other people selecting and handling their groceries, especially fresh produce and meats. Among the people who supported online shopping, access to items that may not be in stock nearby and convenience were cited as top reasons for support.

The full North Carolina report can be found [here](#).